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Wesleyan/Holiness Studies Center at Asbury Theological Seminary

BULLETIN

The Wesleyan Paradigm and the Kaleidoscope within: The Scholarship of Charles Edwin Jones

by Steven D. Cooley
University of Dayton

Charles Edwin Jones has been a leading participant in a generation of historians seeking to introduce Wesleyan-Holiness studies to scholarly consideration and to interpret that tradition to itself. While raising the scholarly level of this discussion, Jones and his colleagues have remained self-consciously animated by questions arising from the subjective core of their locations within this religious tradition. As Jones himself has written, "Most social commentary is in one way or another biographical."¹

Charles was born to Dove and Dess Jones who had migrated from Arkansas to Kansas City, Mo., in early 1924, the peak decade of rural migration into the cities. There Dess began forty years as a street care operator for the city and joined the labor union. The family's rural Baptist and Methodist roots were not easily transplanted to the larger urban churches, but the Jones' found community with other rural emigrants in the Church of God (Holiness), before moving to the slightly more upscale Church of the Nazarene. Both were then disparagingly labeled as "holy roller" churches due to their emotionally demonstrative worship where shouting, weeping, waving of handkerchiefs and aisle running were not unknown. The Nazarene congregation prospered with the establishment of the denomination's headquarters in Kansas City. This institutional

world, however, contrasted to that of the congregation's working laity who daily interacted with the world outside the denomination. This lay working class experience of the Nazarene headquarters church has contributed to Jones's distinctive historical priorities.

In 1954, Charles completed a history degree at Peniel-Bethany College in Bethany, Okla., which published his

Roaring Creek. These established orphanages, schools, and rescue missions rather than churches. Women preachers traveled the circuits, received ordination, and served as head administrators. Worship was noisy and emotional, while personal behavior was firmly restricted. At the furthest fringe, extremists rejected sacraments, advocated marital purity, and questioned the spiritual validity

evangelical history is already apparent in the interpretations of Jones's student paper.² While arising from his personal experience of the tradition, these priorities were also cultivated by the Oklahoma New Deal progressivism of his teacher, Fred Floyd, and further supported by the official Nazarene history at that time by M.E. Redford.³

Redford regarded that era's noisy emotional worship and strict behavioral codes as equally essential as the tradition's theological and institutional identity. Jones's continuation of these earlier official priorities has set his work apart from the tradition's current self-understanding, which has presented itself since the 1950s as essentially an intellectual tradition. Jones's priorities for ritual, behavior, and experience have been a counterpoint to these studies, and have assisted in maintaining something of Redford's earlier balance within the larger conversation overall.

In 1955, Jones completed a master's degree in library science at the University of Michigan. This led to positions as librarian for Park College, curator of manuscripts for the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan, and as cataloger for history at Brown University. This experience as librarian and archivist contributed to Jones's extensive bibliographic publications and to his support of the Nazarene Archives in Kansas City and of the Wesleyan/Holiness Studies

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senior paper. Here Jones displayed most of the distinctive historical priorities he would pursue during the next 40 years. This student paper, which remains worth reading, explored the energetic populist "background" which the Nazarene denominational structure would harness after 1910. We read of obscure folk preachers organized loosely in associations and appearing in places like Chickasha and Hell

of modern medicine and excessive bathing. Holiness theology received quick treatment, and future institutional leaders appeared without the later dignities of office or maturity.

This is history from the bottom up, giving a sympathetic hearing to the democratized Christianity of the white "riffraff" and their concerns for piety and practical action. What has been called the kaleidoscopic "Holiness model" of

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The Wesleyan Paradigm

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Center in Wilmore, Ky.

Jones completed a 1968 doctorate in American history under Merle Curti at the University of Wisconsin. Curti, a distinguished intellectual historian and student of Frederick Jackson Turner, introduced Jones to the Wisconsin emphasis on the role of environment and region in the formation of identity. The publication of his dissertation in 1974, "Perfectionist Persuasion," continued the earlier interests but employed methods then prominent in popular and social history. He compared statistical data in a demographic study of growth and geographic distribution. He reached for a comprehensive geographic sweep of the continent, emphasizing the populist middle regions of the Holiness Movement. He approached the topic through the sociology of religion, being particularly sensitive to the affects on spirituality from urban migration, social location, and institutional forms. And he turned attention to popular thought as approached through the study of metaphor. Rather than dis-

cussing formal theology, Jones focused on the Exodus narratives and the metaphors of Canaan as they appeared in song, sermon, and testimony. The turn to metaphor is undoubtedly the most widely discussed contribution of the dissertation. No less significant, was Jones's reach for a more complex analysis of religion. Holiness religiousness was seen as the conjunction of ritual, life style, and theology interacting with its institutional formations and personal religious experience. For Jones, however, the center remains ritual and experience.

This has resulted in a distinctive body of work seeking to interpret the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition to itself and to introduce that tradition to

vided encyclopedic reference data for the Holiness Movement, Pentecostalism, Black Holiness, and the Charismatic Movement. This has provided future research with a substantial base line from which we may proceed. However, these are not merely reference books, but may ultimately present the most influential statement of Jones's interpretive project.

The Jones bibliographies subtly, but firmly, challenge the elite center of the American Holiness tradition to face its own "dynamic kaleidoscope," mixing lay and clergy, folk, popular, and high culture, Pentecostals and Wesleyans, African Americans and whites. They present a view of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition

authentic in the religious strivings of the common folk and resists the tradition's pursuit of a place in the mainstream by attending to its religious outsiders who challenged the arrogance of that mainstream. Thus, his painstaking efforts to identify the historical record of these small obscure groups and the affect of Holiness outsiderhood in shaping America's pluralist religious culture.

Elements of Jones's earlier work have been developed further in a number of articles. His examination of Kansas City's Holiness churches is an unparalleled case study that analyzes demographic and occupational data for two Holiness congregations (1972). Our literature is weaker for not continuing such sociological studies. In "The Railroad to Heaven" (1972), Jones revisited metaphor and its implications for the history of spirituality. The effect of mass transportation on the traditional Bunyanesque pilgrimage literature is examined in a mix of sources ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story to the camp-meeting spirituals. The conversation he constructed here between the Holiness Movement and the high culture in the arena of literature deserves further exploration. His interest in metaphor has recently compared the Canaan experience of the Holiness Movement with the upper room experience of Pentecostalism (1994, 1995,

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THE JONES BIBLIOGRAPHIES SUBTLY, BUT FIRMLY, CHALLENGE THE ELITE CENTER OF THE AMERICAN HOLINESS TRADITION...

scholarly consideration. The most recognized publications are the dissertation and the six thick volumes of bibliographic studies. Jones's bibliographies have compiled thousands of obscure publications and pro-

not seen since Elmer T. Clark's *Small Sects in America*, but without Clark's contempt nor the anxiety of other historians for the democratizing tendencies of American religious culture. Instead he finds something

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1995). Here, Jones urges more sensitivity to the complexity of language. Attention to how they spoke must not be neglected in the study of what they said.

The central concern of all Jones's work has been the classical issue of charisma and institutionalization as formulated by Weber, Troeltsch, and Niebuhr. This interest, with its concern for the decline of zeal, carried Jones into the study of Puritanism (1960, 1964, 1978, 1980), but has especially found fruition in a series of articles since 1980. Jones claims that while the Holiness separatists emphasized theological issues, the Methodist decline of zeal was even more central to the generation of Phineas F. Bresee and H.C. Morrison (1983, 1985). However, the excesses of unfettered zeal are examined in articles on the Anti-ordinance faction, Fire Baptism, and the emergence of tongues speaking (1987, 1990). These excesses goaded the movement toward firmer institutional structures in an effort to restrain the very zeal they had intended to foster.

An examination of Mattie Mallory's orphanage returned Jones to the fermentive background of the Church of the Nazarene in Oklahoma (1994). This idealistic "faith mission" thrived in the era of loosely structured Holiness associations to become the center of Beulah Heights, a Holiness residential community outside Oklahoma City with a school and a home for unwed mothers. Mallory managed real estate development, worked deals with the railway, administered the school and orphanage, preached, and developed institutional connections first with the Fire Baptized associations, then with the more Methodist associations. The transition to Nazarene denominationalism saw Mallory and her ministry to orphans consumed by the institution's priorities for their own children as Mallory's work was appropriated as the foundation for the Nazarene college and town of Bethany, Okla. For Jones, the transition to denominationalism

FOR JONES, THE TRANSITION TO DENOMINATIONALISM RAISES THE ISSUE OF SPIRITUAL DECLINE.

raises the issue of spiritual decline.

If Jones has contributed a useful counterpoint to the dominant modes of Wesleyan/Holiness history, perhaps we should begin considering how to affirm the insights of both approaches in some larger synthesis. First, rather than choosing between intellectual history and social history, a social history of Wesleyan theology should be undertaken to examine the interaction of theology with the tradition's changing social locations. Second, to integrate Jones's emphasis on ritual and experience with that of the intellectual histories, we must raise our analysis of ritual and experience up to the level of the intellectual histories. The tools for this lie waiting in the social sciences and humanities, but their careful application has hardly begun.

Lastly, by tracing the decline of primitive charisma in the relentless process of institutionalization, Jones employs one of the classic story patterns of American religious studies. This is clearly among the most dominant interpretive paradigms of Methodist history. It is worth questioning. Does not Methodism actually embrace both charisma and institutionalization in ways not quite comprehensible to the sectarian cycle? Rather than decline, are we missing the competition between different centers of charisma, or might charisma not be disappearing but simply relocating or metamorphosing into other forms? Tricky stuff, charisma, eluding the wineskins of our narrative priorities and difficult to keep in the webs of our analysis. At the least, narratives of decline allow little pos-

sibility for the tolerance of new social realities nor for guidance among those realities.

If most social commentary is indeed biographical, then new biographies may be expected to produce fresh commentaries on the Wesleyan/Holiness experience. Yet, while animated by questions arising from new social realities, these new commentaries must also receive cultivation from their teachers and support from the commentary they received. Charles Edwin Jones has provided us with both in assuring the lively continuation of Wesleyan studies as that tradition has sought to understand itself and to enter into the academic conversation of American religious history. He has given us much to think about, and that is as high an achievement as any scholar might attain.

Charles Edwin Jones
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